

The End of the World as We Know It
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I Thessalonians 5:1-24

Luke 3:7-18

I want to begin our thinking with what Paul writes to the Thessalonians and what the author of Luke suggests about the end times in our Gospel text. I always feel a bit uneasy whenever the biblical texts gets too specific about the future. In particular, there are these New Testament passages that make it quite clear that Paul and many of the early Christians were quite convinced that they did not have long for this world. Indeed, Paul and many of his contemporaries apparently believed that the world itself--at least as we know it--did not have long to go. They were expecting "the day of the Lord", a day of judgment, a day when the Lord Jesus Christ would come again. In the Gospel of Luke the author portrays a first coming announced by John the Baptist, but this is a version that has been crafted after the death of Jesus to corroborate early Christian expectations of a Second Coming.

Biblical scholars are widely agreed that Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's existing letters. If so, then it is also the earliest written document in the New Testament. It is one of the earliest written expressions of the Christian faith. We have here a glimpse of what was on the minds of some of the earliest Christians. They thought the day of judgment was imminent, that Christ would soon come again.

As I say, all of this makes me uneasy, because it hardly seems to fit the way we look at the world today. This early Christian expectation has obviously not come to pass. Here, almost two thousand years later, we know that Paul and those who believed with him were wrong in this expectation. So, the question in relation to a text like this: What sense does it make if Paul was mistaken? And what sense does it make if the Gospel writers were also so convinced of this scenario that they deliberately portrayed John the Baptist as the herald simultaneously announcing the arrival of Jesus as Messiah and warning of the wrath to come? As Luke puts it, John says of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." And to top it all off, Luke says of John, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." [Luke 3:16-18]

"Good news!" Really? I guess so, if you're convinced you are wheat and not chaff.

The irony is that this ancient text, with its anxious but mistaken expectation of an imminent coming, may be especially well-suited to speak to us in our time. For we, who may not be looking for the world to end any time soon, nonetheless have a tendency to live as if there were no tomorrow. Whereas Paul and the early Christians, even though they were not very sure about tomorrow and were rather confident that this world as we know it would be ending rather soon,

nonetheless believed that it was very important how they continued to conduct their life together.

I say, we have a tendency to live as if there were no tomorrow. That is perhaps exaggeration, but it is truthful exaggeration. The truthful part is that we often pay little heed to the future consequences of our present actions. It is not just that we live for the day, it is that we do not think all that much about the implications of our actions for others. This may not seem true, may not even be true, for most of us as individuals, but it surely seems true for us as a people. Some of the evidence comes from our economic and political life. A couple of examples:

Despite all the scientific and experiential evidence, global climate change still ranks somewhere down the list of concerns that most of our citizens express when polled about the issues of the day. By all accounts, climate change is happening at a far greater pace than has previously been projected. New Delhi, India, recently had its hottest day on record, 126 degrees, and it's not even summer yet. Glaciers are disappearing, the permafrost in the northern hemisphere is thawing, droughts and floods and fires are much more frequently in the extreme. Yet we remain a consumption driven society. Social, economic, and political changes are taking place, but not nearly fast enough and often in precisely the wrong direction.

Again, the extremes of wealth and poverty in our nation and in the world are undermining democracy, severely tilting the playing field by giving far more political and economic and social power to smaller numbers of people. Yet the will to regulate for the common good, and to tax and redistribute wealth and income, seems to be lacking not only among the 1%-ers who hold unimaginable wealth but also among the general populace. As a people, we seem far more interested in being entertained by celebrities, sports, TV, and social media than in engaging in the pursuits of knowledge and understanding necessary for democratic governance. The proverbial "bread and circuses" by which the masses were pacified in the Roman Empire strikes me as increasingly applicable to our situation today. The famed sociologist Max Weber once wrote, "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective." Those who seem to have the passion often lack perspective, and persistence. Those with the requisite perspective are often unable to muster the passion.

The context for this sermon is this: We are facing an unprecedented situation in human history. We are also facing the end of the world as we know it.

This is hardly the first time that some segment of humanity has faced the end of the world as they knew it. Our biblical texts are testaments to that. There have been times of radical change in the past, times when the future has been uncertain. Times even when the future existence of humanity was in doubt. The story of Noah in the bible, while mythic in nature, reports the demise of all but eight members of the human race – Noah, his three sons, and all their wives. The story ends with God's promise never again to wreak such destruction upon the face of the earth. Nonetheless, the notion of an end time continues to recur throughout human history, especially in times of existential crisis, and we see evidence for that especially in our text from Thessalonians.

In our own time there are numerous places, sadly, where the world as it has been has literally come to an end. The most immediate example that comes to mind is in Gaza, where the homeland of over 2 millions Palestinians has been mostly reduced to rubble. For those who have lived there and known no other home, it is the end of the world as they have known it. For tens of thousands it has been the end of their lives. For those who survive, the future is uncertain and bleak beyond our imagining. With different circumstances and for other particular reasons much the same could be said about the inhabitants of major portions of Yemen and of the Darfur region of Sudan. The Uighurs in China are also under threat. The world as they have known it has come, or is coming, to an end. The same may be said for the millions upon millions of refugees in our world today who cannot return to their homelands if they wish to survive.

For many years now, when someone has asked me, “How are you?” I have often replied, “OK, considering the state of the world.” Which is to say, “Not really OK, but OK enough that I’m still alive and kicking.” Often, if there is a reply, it is a kind of acknowledgment, more often implicit than explicit, to the effect, “I know what you mean. The world is in a mess.” My sense is that most if not all of us carry on our lives against a subliminal awareness that our existence is in peril. Just as we all know that some day we will die, but don’t go around thinking about it all the time, we all sense that our world as we know it is in peril but do not want to dwell on that if we can avoid it.

Not to dwell on it at length, but I’ve seen a couple of different lists of the primary existential threats with which we have to contend. On my list there is the long-standing and continuing threat of nuclear war, a realistic threat given the updating of nuclear arsenals by the major powers and the growth in nuclear capability by nations such as North Korea and Iran. Then there is climate change, which may have already passed the point where human efforts can reverse or stop those changes that will soon make most of the planet uninhabitable for human beings. A third crisis is the erosion of democracy with increasing social polarization, the rise of authoritarianism, and the resort to violence and repression to control the movements of human populations and their exercise of their human rights. A fourth crisis, somewhat harder to define, arises from the rapid growth of technologies and communication networks, including AI (artificial intelligence) and social media, making it extremely easy to deceive, distort, surveil, and fundamentally undermine confidence in the possibility of a truthful grasp of the world.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid thinking about the multiple perils of our world today. The situation, as I said, is unprecedented,. This is both because of the number of existential threats we face and because of our increasing realization that our circumstances are much of our own making. I may be wrong about this, and I don’t want to make too much of it, but it seems to me that in biblical times it was possible to think that God was decisively in control of human history. Because of human sinfulness, God would be justified in putting an end to things, but that was ultimately in God’s hands. Moreover, human beings really did not then have the power to destroy all human life. Nowadays it appears we do – and we can do it several times over with nuclear weapons, or we can use more conventional means of violence and destruction such that the living will come to envy the dead.

So, as the people asked John the Baptist when he warned them of the wrath to come, "What then should we do?" In view of his strident warning, the answers given by the Baptist are remarkably unheroic, perhaps even disappointing. To the multitudes he says, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." To the tax collectors he says, "Collect no more than is appointed you." And to the soldiers, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." John calls for nothing so exciting as a great crusade and nothing so noble as a great sacrifice. He calls for that elemental justice, decency, and human compassion, which are the essential ingredients for the full realization and fulfillment of our common life.

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, declares that God has not destined us for wrath [5:9]. What will become of us remains to be seen. Meanwhile, Paul says, "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. He continues with counsel that has everything to do with how to treat and care for one another in community: "Be at peace among yourselves." "Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all." "Give thanks in all circumstances." Last year I read a little book titled, *When Time Is Short*, written from a religious perspective and in light of the prospect that indeed the time may be short for us not just as individuals but as a species. The author, Timothy Beal, counsels humility with respect to our place in the world and, not unlike Paul, invites us to make the most of the relationships that give meaning and substance to whatever days we have.

We do not want for knowledge, or material resources, or technology, or invention, to address the most desperate needs of our time. We do not want for institutions, channels of communication, avenues for cooperation. There are enough weapons to deter any aggression or obliterate any nation, but they do not make us secure. There is enough food to feed every person, but it is not distributed according to need. There is enough knowledge for all of us to learn how to eat better, sleep better, live better, but we resist the disciplines that are required. There is enough work needing to be done for everyone who wants to have a job, but the political and economic structures of our society provide little opportunity and less incentive for some of the most needed work to be done. Our troubles are really not due to the limited resources at hand. Rather, as theologian H. Richard Niebuhr once observed, "There is that within ourselves and our common life which prevents us from being what we might be" ["What Then Must We Do?", *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY PULPIT*, July 1934, p. 146].

It is hardly possible for us to conceive that we might be able to solve the great crises of our world, or to save it. Yet how utterly essential are the deeds of justice and mercy and faith to our common life! These are the necessary though not sufficient condition of our salvation.

It seems to me that a Christian is one who lives out of the conviction that with all that is deficient in us and our world, we would long ago have been cut down and destroyed were it not for some Power of Goodness at work in our world to redeem and to save. With all the grave dangers that confront us, with all the stupidity and dishonesty and malevolence and greed that infect virtually

every human institution and social transaction and often our very own souls, it is surely some sort of miracle, some evidence of love, some dispensation of grace, that we still live. That does not mean we are going to survive the current existential crises. For us to survive, the world as we know it will need to be positively transformed. Meanwhile, the Christian Gospel urgently points us to the ever-fleeting yet ever-recurring opportunities for life amidst the perils of our day. We are insistently called to live out our faith with daily acts of appreciation, showing compassion, encouragement, and trust in that Goodness not our own. AMEN.